

After Ten Millennia in Hell

Chapter 16 - Are You Sure You're Fine with Just That? (3)

Jeong Ho-Jun's screams rang throughout the swamp, along with the explosive sounds. He could hear the screeches of Lizardmen as they ran toward the source of the noise.

'Crazy fucker!'

Although Ho-Jun had also lured in some Lizardmen with noise, it was completely different from what Oh Kang-Woo had done. What Ho-Jun had done was like throwing firewood at a burning house, but what Kang-Woo had done was the equivalent of pouring a drum of oil onto it.

"R-Run!" Ho-Jun shouted to his party members.

The pale-faced party members began looking for an escape route.

Kang-Woo looked at them very calmly and asked, "Do you seriously believe there's anywhere to run to?"

"Kuh...!"

Just like Kang-Woo said, they were surrounded by Lizardmen. There was no escape route.

Ho-Jun grabbed his shortsword and shouted angrily, "Do you think you'll be safe after doing something like this?! Huh? Are you trying to die with us or what?!"

"Die with you? What are you talking about? You're the only ones who are going to die," Kang-Woo replied.

"Ha! Do you seriously think you can handle that many monsters by yourself?" Ho-Jun shouted with a sneer.

Close to a hundred Lizardmen were coming their way. Even Ho-Jun's party, who got paid to carry newbie Players, considered this a life-threatening situation. There was no way that a Player who had just achieved his Second Awakening would be able to survive a monster wave like this.

"You asked me if I knew that Lizardmen were sensitive to sound, right?" Kang-Woo asked Ho-Jun with a smirk.

Ho-Jun flinched in terror after seeing Kang-Woo's chilling smile.

"I knew," Kang-Woo said.

Then he used the Authority of Silence and kicked around in the swamp, making the water slosh around. However, the sloshing wasn't making any noise.

After watching that, Ho-Jun began trembling. "You... Don't tell me..."

'He has a Trait that lets him control sound.'

Judging by the loud noise Kang-Woo had made before and the fact that he could completely mute the sound he made, it wasn't hard for Ho-Jun to guess the nature of Kang-Woo's Trait.

"Kiiiekk!!"

"Damn it!" Ho-Jun looked anxiously at the group of Lizardmen that were getting closer.

He shouted toward his party members, "Do any of you see an escape route?"

"There's none! We're completely surrounded by Lizardmen!"

Even their faintest shred of hope was gone. Ho-Jun's expression became filled with despair.

Meanwhile, Kang-Woo leaned his back against a tree and watched Ho-Jun with a relaxed expression.

'Perfect timing.'

The party approached Kang-Woo right when he was considering whether he should try horde-hunting.

'I felt a bit uncomfortable doing it by myself.'

The smile on Kang-Woo's face widened.

Even for Kang-Woo, it would be hard to fight against a hundred Lizardmen simultaneously at his current level. He thought of using the Authority of Silence to sneak up on the Lizardmen, attack them, and then back off. However, there was one problem with that. The Lizardmen had bad eyesight, but they weren't blind.

Nevertheless, the appearance of such good bait, Ho-Jun's party, changed things. They would clearly attract more attention than the silent Kang-Woo, so Kang-Woo just had to remain silent as he watched them fight against the Lizardmen.

'Since they carry people for money, I guess they'll be able to resist at least a bit.'

The best part was that they weren't a party of low-level Players; they were a party that earned money by helping people level up. Kang-Woo wasn't sure why they were doing such a thing, but he was sure that they would at least be able to resist a bit longer than a normal party.

He had a smile on his face as he watched the party panic.

'Nothing better than pitting your enemies against each other.'

Kang-Woo didn't need to put his life at risk or fight with everything he had. He just had to keep silently reducing the number of Lizardmen while they were fighting. Then once the Lizardmen were tired from the prolonged battle, he could easily wipe them out.

Furthermore, he could avoid meaningless conflict with Ho-Jun's party, which was like killing two birds with one stone.

"What's wrong? If you don't get into a defensive formation, you'll die without even being able to put up a fight," Kang-Woo said teasingly.

Ho-Jun's party was so panicked that they couldn't even get ready to fight.

'I can't reap the benefits if you don't put up a good enough fight.' Kang-Woo's thoughts would probably make Ho-Jun faint.

Meanwhile, Kang-Woo hid himself as best he could among the vines to avoid being seen by the Lizardmen, who had bad eyesight.

"D-Don't tell me he—!" Ho-Jun muttered. He noticed Kang-Woo had gone into hiding. From that, he guessed what Kang-Woo was trying to do and exclaimed in a fit of rage, "You demon!!!"

'I'm a demon, indeed.' Kang-Woo smirked at Ho-Jun's scream.

Although Kang-Woo looked like a human, he was, in reality, closer to a demon. After all, there was no way a person could live for more than ten millennia without losing their sanity if they weren't a demon.

"If you have time to say stuff like that, use it to get into formation. Do you really want to die without even putting up a fight?" Kang-Woo said.

"Arrrggghhh!" Ho-Jun raised his shortsword and ran toward Kang-Woo in rage.

'Even if I die, I'll at least take you with me!' Ho-Jun thought.

Judging by what he'd seen until now, Kang-Woo's Trait was something related to sound. So, there was a chance he wasn't good in practical combat.

Ho-Jun leaped toward Kang-Woo with rage infused in his shortsword.

"Kiiieekk!"

"Ugh!"

"H-Ho-Jun! Watch out!"

Yet, what blocked his path wasn't Kang-Woo but a group of Lizardmen. Because of his scream, they'd chosen him as their first target. Thanks to the group of Lizardmen leaping toward him from all sides, Ho-Jun couldn't rush over to Kang-Woo anymore.

"All right, struggle as best you can," Kang-Woo said with a laugh.

Ho-Jun couldn't hear what Kang-Woo said because he was using the Authority of Silence, but Ho-Jun could guess what Kang-Woo had said just by looking at his expression.

"AARRGGHH!! YOU SON OF A BITCH!!!"

"Ho-Jun! D-Don't scream!"

The Lizardmen attacked Ho-Jun with their spears. Even though he was raging, he somehow managed to just barely block their attacks with his shortsword.

"D-Defensive formation! We have to get into a defensive formation!" Seo Ye-Ri urgently shouted to the other party members.

Since the party leader had lost his mind, someone else had to take charge.

Still with pale expressions on their faces, the other party members listened to Ye-Ri's orders and got into a defensive formation.

Boom! Crack!

"Kiiieekk!!!"

"Kurgh! Th-There are too many of them!"

"Hold on as best you can!" the man wielding a shield shouted with a desperate expression.

It was hard to keep himself together with so many spear attacks coming from all directions. Although they had previously hunted groups of ten to twenty Lizardmen, facing a hundred of them was a new situation.

Crack!

"We won't have to face a hundred of them all at once! They'll come in waves! Focus on protecting Ye-Ri!" Ho-Jun yelled.

Ho-Jun had joined the formation after being brought back to his senses somewhat by the other party members' screams.

With the protection of her party members, Ye-Ri cast some magic, "Fire Shock!"

She activated her fire-type Trait skill. Fire shot out of her staff and rained down on the Lizardmen.

Fwoosh!

"Kiiieekk!"

The Lizardmen, who were weak to fire, started to scream as they were burned.

"Wow." Kang-Woo looked at the party members with interest.

'They're better than expected.'

There was a reason why they carried newbies. Even while being surrounded by a hundred Lizardmen, they were still able to put up quite a good resistance. Ye-Ri, especially, was doing a great job as she stood in the middle.

Crack!

"Hold on for as long as you can while breaking through the encirclement!"

"Th-There are too many of them!"

Despite doing a good job, the party members looked desperate. They knew that once their stamina was depleted, they wouldn't be able to fight back anymore. Nevertheless, Ho-Jun's party did its best to break through the Lizardmen's encirclement.

'Nice.' Kang-Woo watched their battle with a smile on his face.

Thanks to the party being better than he'd thought, they would probably die along with the Lizardmen.

'I won't even need to lift a finger.'

Kang-Woo had been thinking about how he should deal with the Lizardmen in case Ho-Jun's party died too quickly, but now he could watch the battle a little bit more relaxedly.

He had no intention of helping them. He wasn't a benevolent person. No, he was a person who had grown up in an environment that hadn't let him be benevolent.

Evil had to be dealt with using an even greater evil, and bloodlust had to be dealt with using an even greater bloodlust. The moment Kang-Woo stopped following those rules, he would become the prey.

Initially, Kang-Woo had been worried that if the party died, the corpses could generate problems for him. However, it seemed like he didn't need to worry about that.

'The situation is different from the time I faced Han Tae-Hyun.'

If he had killed Tae-Hyun in that fight, there was a high chance that he would have gotten into trouble. Whereas, in the current situation, Kang-Woo wasn't killing Ho-Jun's party himself. The ones who were about to kill their party were the Lizardmen, and Players died at the hands of monsters all the time.

"Cough! Pant, pant." Ho-Jun, covered in Lizardman blood, was breathing heavily.

There were too many Lizardmen, so it was impossible to break through their encirclement. However, the party had no way to deal with a hundred Lizardmen either.

"S-Save us! P-Please! Save us!!" Ho-Jun shouted to Kang-Woo fearfully.

Ho-Jun's party was so desperate that they had to grab onto anything they could.

While watching them fight desperately, Kang-Woo raised one hand. Then he showed Ho-Jun his middle finger.

"Ah..." a whimper filled with despair emerged from Ho-Jun's mouth.

There was a horrifying smile on Kang-Woo's face. Ho-Jun felt like he could see a certain form overlapping with the smiling Kang-Woo.

"Demon..." Ho-Jun muttered.

It was a demon with black bat wings, two horns, and a long tail. Kang-Woo was definitely a human being, yet Ho-Jun saw the figure of a demon around him.

Crush!

Right when Ho-Jun was standing still out of shock, the spear of a Lizardman pierced his chest.

Chapter 17 - Third Awakening (1)

Fwoosh!

"Kiiieekk..."

The horde of Lizardmen covered in hellfire collapsed to the ground. Already tired from fighting against Jeong Ho-Jun's party, the Lizardmen died from Oh Kang-Woo's attack without being able to put up a fight.

"I guess that pretty much takes care of them," Kang-Woo murmured while looking at the swamp that had become a valley of death.

The scene would make anyone vomit, but Kang-Woo calmly walked across the swamp.

Back when he was in Hell, he had seen many grotesque scenes of corpses lying in pools of blood. The everyday scenes in Hell were more horrifying than this one of a swamp littered with corpses. This level of gore was too mild to shake Kang-Woo.

"Now, let's begin."

Rather, to Kang-Woo, the hundred or so corpses of Lizardmen looked like a feast.

'Although I got almost no experience points...'

Most of the Lizardmen had been killed by Ho-Jun's party, so Kang-Woo had gotten almost no experience points. If he were an average Player, he would feel a bit disappointed, but Kang-Woo had another way to get stronger besides leveling up.

Kang-Woo walked toward the corpses of the Lizardmen. Black smoke emerged from his body and covered the corpses.

Crunch! Crunch!

As the horrible sounds of flesh being munched rang out, the demonic energy inside the Lizardmen's souls was absorbed by Kang-Woo.

Ring!

[Demonic Energy has risen by 1.]

'Good.'

Many Lizardmen had died in this battle, so Kang-Woo managed to absorb a considerable amount of demonic energy.

He continued using the Authority of Predation, and the approximately one hundred Lizardmen corpses quickly disappeared.

Riiing.

[Authority of Predation cannot be used on subjects under the Gaia System's protection.]

"Hmm?"

A message window with a new message Kang-Woo had never seen before appeared in front of him.

Kang-Woo tilted his head while looking at it.

'Gaia System?'

He had heard these words when he first arrived on Earth, but he didn't know what they meant.

Kang-Woo frowned at the unexpected message.

"Ah."

It was at this moment that Kang-Woo remembered Ho-Jun's party.

"Now that I think about it, they're here too."

Among the mountain of Lizardman corpses, Kang-Woo found Ho-Jun, who had been killed by a spear piercing through his chest.

It seemed like the Authority of Predation had tried to devour Ho-Jun and his party members by mistake.

'Subjects under the Gaia System's protection... Is it referring to Players?'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure what the Gaia System was. Nevertheless, considering that he had never seen this kind of message window while using the Authority of Predation on monsters, there was a high chance the subjects mentioned in the message were Players.

'Then this means that I can't use Predation on Players' corpses.'

The first time Kang-Woo had heard about the Traits of Players, he'd naturally thought about whether he could absorb their Traits with his Authority of Predation. Since he could absorb the Authorities of demons, he'd thought that he should be able to obtain the Traits of other Players.

'Well, I guess it doesn't matter.'

Kang-Woo turned away from Ho-Jun's corpse without a hint of disappointment.

The Traits of other Players meant nothing to him. After all, he already had 666 Authorities that practically made him omnipotent.

'The important thing isn't the Traits but the amount of demonic energy.'

The most crucial thing to him was getting enough demonic energy so that he could freely use his 666 Authorities.

Crunch!

Kang-Woo finished absorbing all of the Lizardman corpses with his Predation.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 2.]

[Demonic Energy has reached 30.]

"Sigh."

Kang-Woo let out a short sigh after feeling the demonic energy spread throughout his body.

After absorbing the corpses of hundreds of Lizardmen during this hunt, he certainly felt that quite a considerable amount of demonic energy had accumulated in his body.

'The stat rose by five at once.'

It wasn't a bad result. The fact that he had been able to obtain so much demonic energy without doing much was an incredible achievement.

'I guess its quality also increases with the number.'

After reaching a stat number of 30, his demonic energy became much denser.

Kang-Woo used Andras's Authority as a test.

Fwoosh!

Black flames the size of a person's head blazed in his hand. The energy flowing out of the hellfire now was more ferocious than before, when it had only been the size of his palm.

'Good.'

He could feel a bigger difference with his demonic energy stat rising from 25 to 30 than when it went from 10 to 20.

'Now, I just need to level up.'

Kang-Woo nodded to himself while collecting the mana stones on the ground.

All he had to do now was level up and achieve his Third Awakening. Then, he would finally be able to confirm if the seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core would weaken with each Awakening.

'I guess I'll hunt a bit more.'

He slowly walked away while leaving behind the cold corpses of Ho-Jun's party.

* * *

Three days after the incident with Ho-Jun's party, Kang-Woo continued to level up at an incredible pace while horde-hunting Lizardmen. It took most people about two months to achieve their Third Awakening, but Kang-Woo was already Level 19. If someone were to find out about the speed at which he was leveling up, they would be shocked beyond belief.

"I'll probably achieve my Third Awakening today," Kang-Woo mumbled to himself after having breakfast with Han Seol-Ah.

'Once I reach it, I'll go to a higher-ranking Gate.'

Players needed to be promoted to C-rank to be qualified to enter a C-rank Gate. To do that, not only did they require mana stone exchange statements, but they also needed a Level Certificate that proved that they had achieved their Third Awakening.

It was a safety measure put in place for C-rank Gates and above because the monsters inside them were incomparable to those in D-rank Gates. The monsters in C-rank Gates were so strong that many Players stayed in D-rank Gates even after achieving their Third Awakening. Those people usually earned a living by operating a carry service. Ho-Jun's party members had been like them.

'Additionally, the inspections are apparently far stricter for C-rank Gates and up...'

The soldiers manning the D-rank and E-rank Gates barely looked at Player licenses; it was as if they were doing age checks in a bar. However, this was very different for C-rank and above Gates. The soldiers thoroughly inspected every single personal detail required to ensure the Player had permission to access the Gate.

Kang-Woo wasn't sure if he would be able to enter by using just his Authority of Blindness.

'Since I already have enough mana stones to reach the quota, I just need to level up.'

In just three days, Kang-Woo had earned ninety-two million won. A D-rank mana stone from a Lizardman sold for two hundred and thirty thousand won, and he had hunted over four hundred Lizardmen. It had been a while back since he had already surpassed the number of mana stones necessary for the exchange to raise his Player rank.

"Kang-Woo, will you be hunting at the Gate today as well?" Seol-Ah asked.

"Yes, I'll probably be back by dinner."

"Aren't you pushing yourself too hard? You haven't taken a day off in the past few days..."

"I'm fine," Kang-Woo said calmly.

He really wasn't tired at all.

Hunting Lizardmen had become easier for him after his Demonic Energy stat surpassed 30. Kang-Woo was stronger than two to three carrying parties combined, so there was no way he would be tired.

"Mm, understood."

"How much longer will your basic training last, Seol-Ah?"

"Just a few more days. We'll start Goblin hunting today to level up."

"I see."

"I'm not sure if I'll get a good Trait, but... I want to get my Second Awakening as soon as possible."

"You'll reach it soon."

After having a short conversation with Seol-Ah, Kang-Woo went to the D-rank Gate.

Just like always, many people were gathered in front of the Gate to find party members.

'I've gotten used to this scenery,' Kang-Woo thought.

It had been six days since he returned to Earth. Now he'd become used to seeing people wandering around instead of demons.

'I should take a break after getting my Third Awakening.'

Becoming stronger and earning money to enjoy life on Earth was fine, but he hadn't been able to do any of the things he'd been craving.

Kang-Woo walked toward the Gate while thinking that once he had completed his Third Awakening, he would go enjoy all kinds of entertainment with the money he'd earned by selling mana stones.

"Hey, mister. Are you really struggling that much to find a party?"

"Yes. No one wants a rogue..."

"Haha! Then why don't you join us?"

"Whoa! R-Really?"

While Kang-Woo was walking toward the Gate, he heard a familiar voice.

"Hmm?" Kang-Woo turned toward the voice.

'He must've gotten his Second Awakening.'

It was Kang Tae-Soo, the young man whom Kang-Woo had met while Goblin hunting. Tae-Soo's party already had a few members, but he was still talking to a rogue with whom no one wanted to form a team.

'He's the same as before.'

Kang-Woo smirked at the sight before entering the Gate.

'I should say hi to him later.'

It was said that even a slight brush of sleeves could draw a line of destiny between people. Since Kang-Woo didn't hate people like Tae-Soo, he thought that they should at least exchange greetings.

'But leveling up comes first.'

While staring at his level, which had been stuck at 19 for a while, Kang-Woo quickly searched for a group of Lizardmen. He had something much more important to do than greeting Tae-Soo.

'Found them.'

After finding a group of three Lizardmen, Kang-Woo threw a ball of hellfire the size of his head toward them.

Fwoosh!

"Kiiiekk!!"

The three Lizardmen screamed desperately before burning up and dying instantly.

"Good. Next up..."

Kang-Woo was about to search for his next targets when he heard a familiar sound.

Riiing.

[You have successfully defeated the D-rank monster Lizardman.]

[Your level has risen by 1.]

"Huh?"

Kang-Woo stared bewilderedly at the message window in front of him.

Chapter 18 - Third Awakening (2)

[You have reached Level 20.]

[You have reached Level 20 and have achieved your Third Awakening.]

[Your Third Awakening Trait has been unlocked.]

"I guess I was on the verge of leveling up."

Oh Kang-Woo smirked upon seeing that he had leveled up after killing only three Lizardmen. If he had known that things would turn out like this, he would have just hunted a bit more the previous day.

'Too bad there's no way to know how many experience points are required to level up.'

In any case, it was good that he had achieved his goal sooner than expected.

Before checking his new Trait, Kang-Woo closed his eyes and circulated the demonic energy inside him. It was time to check whether his hypothesis was right or not.

Whir!

The demonic energy that lashed through his body was completely different from before.

Kang-Woo extended his hand and produced hellfire with Andras's Authority.

Fwoosh!

A black flame the size of a human being appeared on top of his hand. The hellfire, which yearned hungrily for life force, twisted about greedily.

Kang-Woo smiled while looking at the fire that was almost two meters tall.

"I knew it."

His hypothesis had been correct.

After he achieved his Third Awakening, the seal of his Ten Thousand Demon Core was weakened, and demonic energy seeped out and flowed throughout his body.

The sensation he felt now was incomparable to what he'd felt when his demonic energy stat rose from 25 to 30.

"Nice."

For Kang-Woo, who possessed more Authorities than any other demon, this rise in demonic energy felt as if he was being freed from chains restricting him from using the Authorities.

'Although, it's still nowhere near enough.'

Even though he had achieved his Third Awakening, he still had far more Authorities that he couldn't use than those that he could. However, he felt much more liberated now compared to when he first arrived on Earth.

'If I keep leveling up at this pace, I'll soon be able to break the seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core completely.'

Of course, leveling up would get harder as time passed by. Nevertheless, he was satisfied with knowing that there was a way to recover his old level of power.

"Urgh, I wouldn't need to do things like this if Gates hadn't appeared on Earth."

If there weren't things like Gates, monsters, and Players, then Kang-Woo wouldn't have to recover his old level of power. After all, what he wanted wasn't something like world domination; he just wanted to live a comfortable life on Earth while enjoying the things that he hadn't been able to.

Yet, after learning about Earth's situation, his thoughts changed.

'I need more power.'

Power was necessary for him to be able to enjoy everything he wanted without having to worry about anything. He had learned over the last ten millennia that the rights of the weak were always trampled on and that the only thing they were left with was pain.

Kang-Woo probably wouldn't need to aim to become an absolute being as he had been in Hell, but he needed power as a safeguard.

"All right, I'll check my new Trait next."

He had already confirmed that the seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core weakened each time he awakened. So, it was now time to see the new Trait he had acquired.

Kang-Woo opened his status window to check.

[Third Awakening Trait: Mana-Hungry Demon (Rank: A)]

[Effect: The Player can convert the mana within mana stones into demonic energy and absorb it.]

"Interesting."

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up after reading about his new Trait.

He had gained yet another way to accumulate demonic energy besides Predation and leveling up.

'Mana stones, huh?'

Mana stones were like the cores of monsters. On Earth, those mana stones were used for energy by numerous industries, so Players were able to earn a lot of money by selling the mana stones that they obtained from monsters to the government.

"Let's test it out."

Kang-Woo took the mana stones out of the Lizardmen that he had just killed and used the power of his new Trait. He could feel the mana inside the stone convert into demonic energy and then flow into his body.

'Not bad.'

Converting the mana within a D-rank mana stone into demonic energy gave him as much demonic energy as what he'd received from using the Authority of Predation on one Lizardman. The addition of this new Trait meant Kang-Woo could get double the amount of demonic energy in total. The new Trait, Mana-Hungry Demon, had a far better effect than Insatiable Hunger, the Trait that he'd acquired with his Second Awakening.

'The only problem is that I won't be able to earn money.'

If he absorbed all the mana inside the mana stones, he wouldn't be able to sell them.

'I guess it'll be fine as long as I don't absorb all of them.'

Compared to a normal person, the amount of money that Players earned was a lot. Furthermore, mana stones sold for higher prices as they increased in rank, so Kang-Woo would probably be able to live comfortably just by selling a few of them.

'After all, I earned ninety million won in the last three days.'

Even if this lowered his profits, it was worth it if he could get twice the amount of demonic energy.

'I guess I won't be going to the Mana Stone Exchange Center today.'

After absorbing the three Lizardman corpses and their mana stones, Kang-Woo moved in search of his next target. He had some extra time left because his hunt had ended far too early.

Since he had obtained a new Trait, Kang-Woo began searching for a place where he could horde-hunt Lizardmen for the last time.

"Now that I think about it, I've never seen a Lizardman boss monster."

He had gotten a C-rank mana stone from hunting a Hobgoblin in an E-rank Gate, so he was expecting to get a higher-ranking mana stone from hunting the boss monster of a D-rank Gate.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Sky to fly up into the sky.

His demonic energy had increased after achieving his Third Awakening, so he was now able to use the Authority of the Sky to some extent.

'I can't see very well from up top because of the vines.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue after he failed to find the boss monster from the sky.

'I might have been able to find it if I were able to use the Authority of the Beholder.'

The Authority of the Beholder, which belonged to the demon Astaroth, was the best Authority that Kang-Woo had for conducting searches. However, he wouldn't be able to search through such a big swamp with the amount of demonic energy that he had currently.

Disappointed, Kang-Woo slowly descended toward the ground.

Clash! Clang!

"What's the meaning of this, misters?!"

Kang-Woo suddenly heard a familiar voice.

"Tae-Soo?" he realized.

It was the voice of Kang Tae-Soo, whom Kang-Woo had last seen in front of the Gate trying to gather party members. There was a sense of urgency and anger in his voice.

'What's going on?' Kang-Woo wondered inwardly.

He would've ignored it if it were the voice of a stranger, but since it was someone he knew, his curiosity surged.

Kang-Woo landed on the ground and went to where the screams were coming from.

Bam!

"Kurgh!!"

"Sigh, this muscle pig is so damn solid."

"Urgh, why..."

Kang-Woo saw two people wielding a sword and an axe against Tae-Soo. Beside Tae-Soo was the young rogue that Kang-Woo had seen earlier at the Gate entrance with Tae-Soo. The rogue had fainted and was losing blood.

"Why are you attacking your own party members?!" Tae-Soo yelled.

"You're so damn loud. What if you end up drawing the attention of Lizardmen?"

"Just answer the question!" Tae-Soo shouted angrily while raising a shield that was the size of his whole body.

'Was he betrayed by his party members?' Kang-Woo frowned.

Just hearing the short conversation between the three people was enough for Kang-Woo to figure out what had happened. They were from the same party, but two members had suddenly turned against Tae-Soo and the rogue.

'Are they Chaos Players?'

Chaos Players were malicious Players who killed fellow Players instead of monsters and took their belongings, taking advantage of the fact that it wasn't unusual for people to die inside Gates. The government actively took action to stop Chaos Players due to their atrocious deeds.

"Shut up and stay still."

Clang!

"Kurgh!"

After being hit by the axe wielder, Tae-Soo was pushed back. Even so, he didn't let his shield go and glared at them.

"Sigh, you're tenacious. I'll give you that."

"Is he seriously only at his Second Awakening? Why is he so sturdy?"

The two men looked at Tae-Soo in disbelief.

Tae-Soo gritted his teeth and strengthened his grip on his shield, which then glowed blue.

"Just like you said, I won't go down easily," Tae-Soo said.

"Well... it looks like you've unlocked a fairly high-ranking Trait."

"Even so, someone who hasn't even gone through their Third Awakening won't be able to defeat us."

The two men approached Tae-Soo with wicked smiles.

Tae-Soo had put up a commendable fight so far, but the two men were Players whose levels were in the thirties and had already achieved their Fourth Awakening. The great

difference between their levels and Tae-Soo's level could not be overcome by just having a higher-ranked Trait.

"Let's wrap this up."

"You know that we need them alive, right?"

"Of course."

The two men smirked and raised their weapons.

Kang-Woo, who was hidden behind some vines, frowned a bit after hearing what the two men said.

'They need them alive?'

The two men's conversation didn't match what he'd read about Chaos Players.

Kang-Woo looked at the shield-wielding Tae-Soo, who wore a nervous expression.

'Should I help him?'

Kang-Woo would've ignored the situation if he had never exchanged any words with the man in the past. He really didn't like getting involved in bothersome things. However, even though they'd only exchanged a few words, Tae-Soo had been kind to him. So, Kang-Woo felt bad ignoring him in such a situation.

Whiiiiir.

"Hold on to your shield tight, muscle pig. This is going to hurt a lot," the man wielding the axe said with a voice full of confidence.

Then he began gathering strength, and black energy covered his axe.

"...!" Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

'Demonic energy?'

The energy coming out from the man was undoubtedly demonic energy, which was fundamentally different from mana. Furthermore, it was an energy that an ordinary human being shouldn't have.

Frowning, Kang-Woo walked out from behind the vines.

It was no longer about whether he should help Tae-Soo.

'Who are these guys?'

Kang-Woo had to know more about the humans who possessed demonic energy.

Chapter 19 - Andras Guild (1)

Rustle.

"Huh?" The axe wielder turned his head toward the rustling sound. "Who the hell are you?"

"A passerby?" the other man uttered.

Both men glared at Oh Kang-Woo.

The sword wielder clicked his tongue and continued, "You're out of luck. Since you've seen us, don't even think about getting back home safe."

"What a bother," the axe wielder said.

They pointed their weapons toward Kang-Woo while making shady smiles.

The axe wielder then said at a low volume to the sword wielder, "But... we don't need to take this guy alive, right?"

"Yeah, I guess not. We already have enough with these two."

"Hehehe. I see."

The axe wielder had a chilling grin as he approached Kang-Woo. The demonic energy around the edge of his axe quivered drearly.

While taking a closer look at Kang-Woo, the axe wielder licked his lips and said, "His looks aren't bad... and he has a nice body. Kekekeke. It'll be fun to chop him into pieces."

The axe wielder stared at Kang-Woo intensely. It was clear from his heavy breaths that he held disgusting intentions toward Kang-Woo.

"Haa, haa! Come on. Lemme see your back!" the axe wielder shouted in between heavy breaths.

"..." Kang-Woo frowned.

'The fuck's with him?'

He wasn't sure what the axe wielder meant by wanting to see his back, but it felt extremely unpleasant.

"Kekeke! Scream! If you do, maybe I'll forgive you!"

Stomp!

While laughing unpleasantly, the axe wielder stomped on the ground and then rushed toward Kang-Woo, aiming for his neck.

Kang-Woo took a step forward and simply raised his hand. He didn't need to use an Authority or an intricate battle strategy against someone like this.

Slap!

"Kurgh!"

The axe wielder was slapped in the face and sent rolling to the ground. He staggered to his feet with a confused expression on his face.

"Wh-What? What are you doing? Something isn't right—"

Kang-Woo approached the man and slapped him violently on the face again.

Slap!

"Kurgh!"

After Kang-Woo achieved his Third Awakening, his physical abilities were drastically enhanced by the explosive rise in his demonic energy.

Whack! Slam! Wham!

"Cough! Agh! W-Wait!"

Kang-Woo had once used just his ten millennia of combat experience to overwhelm an opponent who had achieved his Third Awakening. So, it didn't matter if his opponent had achieved his Fourth Awakening. His opponent was no match for Kang-Woo, especially since his demonic energy stat now far surpassed what other Players would have after their Fourth Awakening.

"Son of a bitch!" the sword wielder cursed.

Upon seeing his partner getting beaten up, he charged toward Kang-Woo. The man's sword was enveloped in demonic energy as well.

Kang-Woo lightly twirled his hand in the air while staring at the sword. He activated the Authority of Shattering Air, and a bullet made of compressed air flew toward the sword wielder.

After being hit with an air bullet that could even shatter boulders, the man tumbled to the floor with blood pouring out of his mouth.

"Cough... Wh-What the..." the sword wielder uttered in disbelief.

"There's something I want to ask you," Kang-Woo said.

He slowly walked toward the axe wielder, whose face was now covered with blood.

Kang-Woo crouched down in front of the fallen axe wielder and asked in a low voice, "Where did you get demonic energy?"

It was unlikely that the two men had Traits that allowed them to convert mana into demonic energy—let alone the power of Predation, which allowed one to absorb demonic energy from the souls of monsters.

"You..." the axe wielder began to say with a stiff expression. He asked dispiritedly, "How do you know about demonic ener—"

Slam!

Kang-Woo slapped the axe wielder, almost breaking his neck.

"I'm the one asking the questions. You just need to answer them," Kang-Woo stated.

"Ugh! Cough! Cough!"

"I'll ask you again. Where did you get demonic energy?"

"Urgh..." The axe wielder trembled in fear upon feeling the bloodlust that Kang-Woo exuded.

Kang-Woo stared at the axe wielder and used the Authority of Fear. He couldn't make the axe wielder his puppet yet because he wasn't scared enough. However, the Authority of Fear had other uses, like deepening the fear that the target felt toward the user of the Authority.

"A-Ahhhh..." The axe wielder peed his pants.

From his point of view, Kang-Woo looked like a horrible monster rather than a human being.

The axe wielder slowly opened his mouth and said, "G-Guildmaster..."

"Seo Tae-Ho! What the hell are you saying?! Are you insane?!" the sword wielder cried out and tried to get up.

Kang-Woo turned toward him. "Don't move."

"Eek!" the sword wielder shrieked.

Overwhelmed by the immense demonic energy emerging from Kang-Woo, the sword wielder fell to the ground in shock. He looked up at Kang-Woo as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"H-How do you have demonic energy?!" he exclaimed.

"I told you not to move," Kang-Woo said.

Bash!

Kang-Woo fired another air bullet at the sword wielder, sending him tumbling to the ground unconscious.

Kang-Woo looked at Seo Tae-Ho. "Guildmaster?"

"Y-Yes!" Tae-Ho replied.

"What's the name of your guild?"

"A-Andras! We're from the Andras Guild!"

"..."

The Andras Guild had formed by taking the name of one of the seventy-two demons of Solomon. This was the mid-sized guild that Han Tae-Hyun was a member of. Many shady rumors were circulating about them.

"Our guild master bestowed us this power through a ritual!"

"Ritual?" Kang-Woo frowned after hearing that word. "What's this ritual?"

"Umm..." Tae-Ho's eyes shook; he couldn't hide his fear.

Kang-Woo increased the effect of the Authority of Fear, and Tae-Ho began frothing at the mouth while his whole body trembled.

"Tell me," Kang-Woo said.

"The r-ritual. Ritual... Ritu— AARRGG!!"

The veins all over Tae-Ho's body suddenly became very distinct. He writhed in agony as if something had taken root within his body. Then he vomited black blood and died without Kang-Woo being able to do anything about it.

Kang-Woo looked at the corpse and frowned.

'They must have planted something inside him so that he wouldn't spill anything about the ritual.' This was the only explanation Kang-Woo could think of.

Kang-Woo turned away from Tae-Ho's body, stood up, and walked toward Kang Tae-Soo.

"I-Is that you, K-Kang-Woo hyung?" Tae-Soo asked.

"Yeah."

"H-How did you... all by yourself..."

It had only been a few days before when he'd encountered Kang-Woo in an E-rank Gate, yet Kang-Woo had just defeated two Players who had already achieved their Fourth Awakening.

Kang-Woo shrugged his shoulders and calmly replied, "I was in the E-rank Gate that day because I had something to take care of there."

"Whoa! I see! So, you weren't a newbie in the first place?"

"Right," Kang-Woo lied.

He did so very naturally, even though he had just become a Player recently.

"Ha. I understand now what you meant back then. Anyway, thank you so much. If it weren't for you, I would've died at the hands of those two," Tae-Soo said.

"Th-Thank you for saving us." The other young man, the rogue who was losing blood, bowed to Kang-Woo with gratitude. "My name's Kim Tae-Hyun."

"I'm Oh Kang-Woo."

"Haha! I guess this is why they say that you should try to know as many people as possible! I would've never imagined that you were a high-level Player, Kang-Woo hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo burst into laughter while making a big fuss.

Kang-Woo looked at Tae-Soo with a smile.

"I'll definitely pay you back for today, hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo declared.

"Sure."

"That aside, I knew that the Andras Guild had a bad reputation, but to think that they would do something like this..." Tae-Soo frowned while looking at the two men who had attacked him.

Despite the Andras Guild's bad reputation, Tae-Soo never expected that there would be Chaos Players among their members.

Tae-Soo added, "I'll report today's incident to the Hwarang Corps[1]!"

"Hwarang Corps?"

"They're a group of Players under the government's direct control. If I put in a report that the Andras Guild is employing Chaos Players, the Hwarang Corps will begin investigating immediately."

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo remained silent for a little while and thought about it. Then he said, "Don't report today's incident."

"Hmm? What do you mean, Kang-Woo hyung-nim?"

"I'm going to deal with the Andras Guild personally."

Kang-Woo had to investigate the ritual that was being used to bestow demonic energy onto humans. If the government got involved, he probably wouldn't be able to conduct a proper investigation of his own.

"Hmm... Understood." Tae-Soo nodded with a heavy expression.

Kang-Woo was surprised by Tae-Soo's response.

'He's more quick-witted than I'd thought.'

Tae-Soo had such rough features that one could be suspicious about whether he was a monster or a person, but it seemed like he'd quickly figured out Kang-Woo's intentions.

'That'll make things quick, then.'

Kang-Woo thought that he would be able to investigate the Andras Guild comfortably now.

He said, "Okay. Then forget about what happened he—"

Stomp!

"I, Kang Tae-Soo, will come with you to punish the Andras Guild bastards with my iron fist of justice!"

"What?"

"Aren't you trying to take justice into your own hands? Just like in martial arts novels?!"

'Not really.'

"I love martial arts novels!"

'Who asked?'

"I, Kang Tae-Soo, am moved by your burning desire for justice! Since I owe you my life, I want to use it by helping your cause!" Tae-Soo knelt on one knee and looked up at Kang-Woo with sparkling eyes.

Right then, Kang-Woo saw someone else's figure overlap with Tae-Soo's.

Kang-Woo put his hand on his forehead as if he had a headache.

'Why does he resemble Balrog so much?'

1. Hwarang, which means "Flowering Knights", were an elite group of male warriors in Silla, an ancient kingdom of the Korean Peninsula that lasted until the 10th century. ㄹ

Chapter 20 - Andras Guild (2)

Balrog had been the first strong demon that Oh Kang-Woo had encountered back when he had moved from the Eighth Hell to the Ninth. Aside from the seven princes of Hell, there hadn't been anyone stronger than Balrog. Yet, after fighting against Kang-Woo just once, Balrog had sworn his eternal loyalty to Kang-Woo.

'He was a persistent one.'

Balrog was so simple and hot-tempered that Kang-Woo wondered if his brain was only full of muscle like his body. Nevertheless, Balrog was one of the subordinates that Kang-Woo cared about the most.

"...First, let's get out of here," Kang-Woo said.

"Hahaha! Understood!" Kang Tae-Soo replied enthusiastically.

Kang-Woo tried to grab the sword wielder, who had lost consciousness.

"Allow me to carry him, hyung-nim," Tae-Soo intercepted.

However, Tae-Soo picked up the sword wielder instead. He hung the sword wielder over his shoulder and walked toward the Gate. The sword wielder was quite large compared to most guys, yet he looked like a kid when Tae-Soo picked him up.

'How is he not a monster?'

Kang-Woo smirked as he looked at Tae-Soo, who looked like a monster carrying its food around.

* * *

"Thank you very much!" Kim Tae-Hyun bowed to Kang-Woo as soon as they made it outside. "I'll definitely grow out of being a first-aid administrator and repay you for today's favor!"

"First-aid administrator?" Kang-Woo asked.

"That's what they call rogues because that's all they're good for, Kang-Woo hyung-nim. No one wants to form a party with a rogue. They can't properly tank or deal damage, so no one wants them in their parties," Tae-Soo explained.

"Aha." Kang-Woo nodded.

After bowing to Kang-Woo with a determined look, Tae-Hyun turned around and walked away.

Kang-Woo smiled while watching Tae-Hyun leave.

'It's a good thing when people owe you favors.'

Making acquaintances like that was a lot better than mindlessly creating enemies. Moreover, perhaps Tae-Hyun might truly break past a rogue's limits and become a high-level Player one day.

'Although the chances are low.'

Regardless, Kang-Woo had nothing to lose.

He shifted his gaze from Tae-Hyun to Tae-Soo, who was gazing at him with bright eyes. Kang-Woo felt as if he had a very well-trained bear next to him.

'The problem is what I should do with him.'

Judging by what Tae-Soo had said, it seemed like Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to shake him off easily.

"What level are you?" Kang-woo asked.

"I'm Level 12. I got my Second Awakening recently," Tae-Soo answered.

"Hmm... You didn't get basic training?"

"I got a C-rank Trait with my First Awakening, so I immediately hunted to level up."

"Oh, I see."

A C-rank Trait was considered incredibly high ranked for a First Awakening Trait.

Kang-Woo looked at Tae-Soo with interest. "So, what rank is your Second Awakening Trait?"

"Hehe, I got an A-rank Trait for my Second Awakening."

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up while gazing at Tae-Soo, who answered with great confidence.

'He's way more talented than I expected.'

A Player was considered talented if they acquired a B-rank or higher Trait with their Second Awakening. Yet, Tae-Soo had gotten an A-rank Trait. It was a rank that exceeded expectations.

'No wonder those guys were struggling with him.'

The two men from the Andras Guild had a hard time with Tae-Soo because the rank of his Trait was quite high, despite his level being very low in comparison.

"Why didn't you join a guild? With that rank, I'm sure you'd be able to join any you wished for."

"I've been looking for one, but I won't be joining one anymore."

"...?"

Tae-Soo clenched his fists and looked at Kang-Woo with intense eyes.

"Your sense of justice has moved me, hyung-nim! I, Kang Tae-Soo, want to follow you from now on!" Tae-Soo shouted while blasting air from his nostrils.

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo crossed his arms at this sight.

'Not bad.'

At first, he'd thought that Tae-Soo was annoying, but he'd changed his opinion a little bit after hearing the rank of Tae-Soo's Trait. Tae-Soo wouldn't be of great help to Kang-Woo yet, but he was certainly worth investing in.

'The chances of someone who got a high-ranking Trait with their Second Awakening getting even better ones in their subsequent Awakenings are very high.'

It was possible that Tae-Soo might get an S-rank Trait or better in the future.

'It wouldn't be a bad idea to have him as a subordinate.'

Kang-Woo was used to moving alone, so he didn't need someone to fight alongside him. However, it was a different story if it was someone who swore absolute fealty to him. Two people could do more than one, after all. Having someone who could do the bothersome things was a good enough reason to have a subordinate.

'And also...'

Kang-Woo could feel a strong sense of loyalty coming from Tae-Soo.

The most important thing that was needed in a subordinate wasn't strength but unchanging loyalty—the certainty that the subordinate wouldn't ever backstab their superior. In that sense, having a subordinate like Tae-Soo would probably be very helpful.

'Now that I think about it, Seol-Ah is going to get her Second Awakening soon too.'

Kang-Woo thought that Han Seol-Ah, who was a healer, and Tae-Soo, who was a tanker, would form quite a good party.

'He's worth the investment.'

Considering Tae-Soo's talent, he was certainly worth investing in.

"Okay, I'll lead you from now on."

"Whoa! Thank you, Kang-Woo hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo shouted with an excited voice and sparkling eyes.

"Will we be invading the Andras Guild base right now? Haha, I'll protect you with my life, hyung-nim."

"No, I'm going to the Andras Guild by myself."

"Huh...? Wh-Why?"

"Tae-Soo," Kang-Woo called Tae-Soo's name in a low voice.

Hearing that, Tae-Soo flinched, with his shoulders tensing unconsciously.

Kang-Woo kept talking in that same low voice, "You almost died while fighting against two measly members of the Andras Guild, right?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Do you seriously believe you'll be able to protect me?"

"..."

After hearing the facts, Tae-Soo couldn't say anything, and his expression turned sullen. He also knew very well that he couldn't be of help to Kang-Woo currently.

Kang-Woo put his hands on the disheartened Tae-Soo's shoulders. "It's okay."

"Hyung-nim?"

"You're just starting. If you're weak, you just have to get stronger, right?"

After hearing that, Tae-Soo's face regained its vigor. "Yes! That's right! My story hasn't even begun yet!"

"That's right."

"Haha. I'll soon become strong enough to be your shield!"

Kang-Woo smirked and nodded. "I trust you."

"Please give me your number, hyung-nim. I'll come running if you ever need me."

"Oh, yeah, I wanted to ask you a favor."

"Oh, just say the word, hyung-nim," Tae-Soo answered excitedly after hearing the word 'favor.'

"Someone I know will complete their basic training in a few days. I want you to form a party with that person and level up together."

"Oh? Could you tell me what class that person is?"

"A healer."

"If that's the case, I should be the one asking you to let them join me. Getting a damage dealer is relatively easy, so I think I'll be able to create a good party." Tae-Soo nodded while showing his signature goody-two-shoes smile.

"Okay, then I'll contact you later."

"Are you going straight to the Andras Guild?"

"I'm not sure..."

Kang-Woo looked at the unconscious man who was on the ground.

If he made use of this sword wielder, he would be able to find the Andras Guild's base easily.

'Facing the Andras Guild isn't going to be a problem.'

Things might be different if the guild in question were one of the big guilds that controlled Korea. However, the Andras Guild was only a mid-sized guild, so Kang-Woo would probably be able to face them with his current level of power.

The seal of his Ten Thousand Demon Core had become weaker after he achieved his Third Awakening. Due to that, he now had great power that was unimaginable from a Level 20 Player.

Furthermore, Kang-Woo's strength couldn't be measured only by his level and stats. He had the fighting skills he'd polished for ten millennia, and he could use them to overwhelm even an opponent with higher stats.

'The problem is how I am going to get inside without being discovered.'

It wasn't that Kang-Woo didn't have an Authority that allowed him to conceal his presence, but it wouldn't be easy to stay concealed for a long time from Players, who had senses more developed than normal people.

'If they discover me, I might lose the opportunity to find out more about the ritual.'

If that happened, his reason for investigating the Andras Guild would disappear.

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo thought about all of this with his eyes closed.

"Urgh, where am I...?" The man who had been unconscious trembled as he stood up at that moment.

He had recovered consciousness at the perfect time, and Kang-Woo violently grabbed his neck.

"Kurgh!"

"There's something I want to ask you. You can kindly answer me, right?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Kurgh! Hurgh!"

"If you understood, nod."

The man nodded as his face was turning blue. "Cough! Cough! Cough!"

"What's your name?"

"K-Kang Cheol-Ho."

"Okay. Cheol-Ho, you said before that you had to take the two Players that you had attacked alive. Right?"

Kang Cheol-Ho kept his mouth shut and tried to avoid Kang-Woo's gaze.

Kang-Woo could see cold sweat dripping from Cheol-Ho's forehead.

"I-I don't remember," Cheol-Ho finally said.

"Really?" Kang-Woo asked.

Then he kicked Cheol-Ho in the face as if his head were a football.

Slam!

"Cough!"

"How about now? Did that jolt your memory?"

"U-Urghhh..."

"Do you need more?"

"N-No!" Cheol-Ho paled and shook his head.

Tae-Soo's mouth was agape as he watched Kang-Woo question Cheol-Ho like a master interrogator.

"W-We were trying to take them alive to use them as sacrifices," Cheol-Ho yielded.

"Sacrifices?"

"Yes."

"For the so-called ritual?" Cheol-Ho nodded with a stiff expression.

Kang-Woo chuckled. "You guys are crazier than I thought."

He wasn't sure about the details of the ritual, but considering that you had to use a living person as a sacrifice, it was probably an archaic type of ritual.

"Hmm." Kang-Woo fell into deep thought.

'A sacrifice, huh...?'

Suddenly, a thought crossed Kang-Woo's mind, and a smile appeared on his face.

Kang-Woo turned his head to Cheol-Ho and spoke in a low voice, "I need you to do me a favor."